

## An Individual's Experience: A Socio-Cultural Critique of Communication Apprehension Research

Gordon Alley-Young

*Communication Apprehension (CA) literature largely focuses on quantifying and measuring CA and related phenomena. Less attention is paid to studying the individual and his/her social and cultural experiences of communication barriers. These factors can complicate making attributions of CA across diverse populations or even lead to misattributions that may further marginalize minority individuals. This critical essay conceptualizes what it could mean to experience CA and argues that cultural and social factors complicate making attributions of CA across cultural and social groups. This paper concludes with suggestions for future CA inquiry and educational practice by looking at the CA phenomenon through lenses provided by critical pedagogy.*

**Key words:** communication apprehension, critical pedagogy, communication barriers, educational practice, culture.

Communication Apprehension (CA) research enriches my own teaching practice, yet this literature pays less attention to the individual research subject, frequently students, and his/her social and cultural experience of CA. More often research focuses on quantifying and measuring the CA phenomenon. Studying CA this way can overlook social and cultural factors that might lead to attributions of CA. Social and cultural factors complicate making of attributions of CA across diverse populations or can lead to misattributions that can pathologize particular cultural and social groups. This essay argues that cultural and social orientations can complicate making attributions of CA and offers suggestions for future inquiry and teaching practice by looking at the CA phenomenon through lenses provided by critical pedagogy.

### Clarifying Communication Apprehension

McCroskey's (1977) definition is most cited in CA research. He states that CA denotes, "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78). This definition is significant because it is so frequently cited to conceptually define CA and because it defines the CA phenomenon as an individual's experience. The vast amount of research into CA attests to the concern of CA

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researchers to help those individuals who experience apprehension as a barrier to effective communication. I recognize this because despite my critique of aspects of and perspectives on CA research I do not question the motives of CA scholars. I am instead trying to complicate what could be a cultural shortsightedness in certain CA research.

Self-report measures like the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) or State Communication Apprehension Measure (SCAM) measure CA levels. McCroskey (1997 b) notes that the PRCA-24 is the most current version for measuring trait-like apprehension that is consistent across communication contexts. The PRCA-24 has been deemed highly valid and reliable. The PRCA-24 has six items for each of four contexts (i.e., public speaking and speaking in classes/meetings, small groups, and dyads). SCAM, a 20-item Likert-type self-report measures CA in particular situations. It is claimed to have good reliability and good face validity (McCroskey, 1997 a).

Related constructs also seek to account for the anxiety, avoidance, fear, and/or reluctance surrounding communication. Speech anxiety (Ayers, 1988; Beatty and Andriate, 1985; Behnke and Sawyer, 1998) identifies the anxiety accompanying public speeches and can be defined as a state dimension of the larger trait-like phenomenon of CA. Unwillingness to communicate (Burgoon, 1976) signals an unwillingness that could be compared to trait-like CA. Reticence (Keaten and Kelly, 2000; Phillips, 1997) focuses on behaviors that appear in response to communication anxiety. Language anxiety is associated with ESL individuals' written and oral communication (Cheng, Horowitz, and Schallert, 1999). Shyness (Zimbardo, 1977) includes those who opt for solitude as well as those lacking the confidence or skills for communicating. In addition, CA has also been adapted to the study of intercultural/interethnic apprehension (ICA) (Neuliep and McCroskey, 1997), performance classroom apprehension (Hincliff-Pelias and Pelias, 1988; Pelias, 1997), and classroom communication apprehension (CCA) or anxiety (Bowers et. al., 1986; Olaniran and Roach, 1994; Roach and Olaniran, 2001). Kelly (1982) compared CA to reticence, unwillingness to communicate, and shyness and found similarities in manifestation and/or triggers across these constructs.

Kelly (1982) should be lauded for urging researchers to eschew academic politics to integrate research efforts and better understand communication barriers. Yet there can be advantages to looking at communication barriers from different perspectives. This is the belief at the heart of this essay that questions that CA research conducted on populations presumed to be homogeneous. From a perspective informed by critical studies of pedagogy and difference I argue that CA research also needs to account for the cultural and social differences among CA subjects as this can possibly lead to problematic attributions of CA. I call for a return to the spirit of the original definition of CA by refocusing on the concept of CA as an experience of the individual learner.

### Communication Apprehension and Culture

My critique is on one hand directed at the quantitative research tradition. The popularity and accessibility of Likert-type reports like the PRCA-24 have no doubt assisted in the widespread popularization of CA as a construct. This type of quantitative research into CA can lead researchers to overlook cultural and social difference. When we research in this way there is a tendency to fix or naturalize subject populations as singular cultural units when the true nature of any culture is much more varied. The unique linguistic challenges faced by marginalized cultural and social groups are lost when CA research reifies US-American subject populations as a homogenous culture. Yet the US-American experience is heavily influenced by one's culture and social circumstances. Could these factors also contribute to increased attributions of apprehension when apprehension may or may not be the complicating factor?

McCroskey, Fayer, and Richmond (1985) studied the effect that culture and English language proficiency can have on CA when they contrasted Puerto Rican and mainland-US-

American university populations. This study is interesting to me for a couple of reasons. First, the study shows how requiring ESL speakers to communicate in English with native English speakers can evoke apprehension. Secondly, the study implies that the mainland-US culture is as homogenous as Puerto Rico. Previous studies of CA speak of US populations as an entity with particular CA characteristics. However not differentiating a US-American population into its constituent co-cultures can obscure the higher findings of CA made amongst marginalized groups within the USA.

Neuliep and McCroskey (1997) use US-Americans to create intercultural and interethnic communication apprehension measures and they do specify the cultural groups represented in their samples. Their instrument poses questions to subjects that leave the meaning of term *culture* undefined. Does culture include the variety of cultural backgrounds included in the sample of US-American college students used or is *culture* here referencing any culture that exists outside the USA? Neuliep and Ryan (1998) in studying intercultural communication apprehension (ICA) conceptually define the variable culture by specifying separate subject groups of US-American university students and international exchange students. Dyads composed of one US-American student and one exchange student constituted an intercultural exchange for this research. This research design privileges the melting pot conception of the US-American culture because it both recognizes culture as coming from outside and privileges US-American nationality as conferring a singular culture upon its citizens. Work in critical theory challenges the wisdom behind such assumptions. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) argue that asserting a homogenous culture reflects white privilege because this rhetorical move elides non-white co-cultural groups under the label of US-American.

The assumption of the US as a homogeneous culture against which cultural others are compared, researched, and studied has also characterized intercultural communication research. Martin and Davis (2001) note that since the majority of early investigators in intercultural communication were white, middle-class US-Americans the convention of studying culture necessitated looking outward. The result was cross-cultural comparisons of communication patterns most often comparing US populations with Asian populations.

Such cross-cultural comparisons are reflected in the above-cited work as well as in the efforts of Elliott, Scott, Jensen, and McDonough (1982) who contrast Korean and US-American perceptions of reticence. Similarly Klopff and Cambra (1979) contrast CA levels in Australia, Japan, and Korea with levels found in America. Interestingly Klopff and Cambra (1979) question the American-ness of their US-American sample because 62% of those subjects had a Japanese ethnicity. An unstated implication of this concern could be that a US-American subject pool would not be so highly representative of a non-white co-cultural group. Would the researchers express the same concern if their subject group was disproportionately composed entirely of white Americans of European descent? Martin and Davis (2001) conclude of similar intercultural research that *American* is synonymous with *white* but acknowledging this reveals the privilege associated with white ethnicity in a US-American context. I wish to examine how CA research, acting upon such unexamined assumptions about US-Americans, could be making contestable attributions of CA amongst groups that exist outside of the white, European US-American norms of language and culture.

To revisit McCroskey and Richmond (1985), they found that Puerto Rican students compared to mainland US-American students had both the highest and lowest levels of CA. Puerto Ricans gave themselves low self-evaluations of English language proficiency and reported higher CA when speaking in English while reporting the lowest CA levels on measures when answering about speaking in their native Spanish. This study raises more questions than it answers. Were the low CA scores reported by Puerto Rican students in their own language unusually low because they were juxtaposing it to the experience of communicating in English? Do these speakers fear

negative evaluations of their language ability or have they developed cognitive patterns linked to Spanish making it difficult to speak/think in English?

McCroskey and Richmond (1985) suggest a situational apprehension experienced by Puerto Rican students communicating in English with native speakers. However subsequent research overlooks the potential of culture and language as factors in apprehension instead focusing on the consistency of trait apprehension. For instance, Jung and McCroskey (2004) study trait communication experienced by ESL speakers citing research that suggests a cross-linguistic consistency of trait-like CA. The results indicate that, although both first and second languages are learned, the CA associated with them most likely is not. This research employs a communibiological paradigm in which environment or situation is negated as influence on interpersonal behavior. Can we expect this vein of communibiological and trait studies of intercultural CA to fully address the scope of communication barriers that individuals face intercultural? If McCroskey and Richmond (1985) are correct and there is a notable difference in CA levels for native and non-native speakers of English what does this study mean for those raised in Spanish speaking communities but educated in English speaking schools?

Hispanics are the largest US co-cultural group at 38.8 million, almost half of whom is foreign born (Ramirez and de la Cruz, 2002). Yet US public education provides few options for Spanish and bilingual Spanish-English students who wish to be successful other than to master the English language. Valenzuela (1999) notes how school ESL programs channel students into the English mainstream with little concern for preserving native language or culture. This creates a tracking curriculum of lower achievement and fewer opportunities for non-native English speakers (Valenzuela, 1999). Bilingual education is controversial. In California, in 1998 voters passed Proposition 227 to eliminate all bilingual learning and to designate public schools as English-only. Critics suggest that the large number of white voters who supported the bill were trying to assert their cultural authority in the face of increased Hispanic immigration to the state.

Currently only 57% of US-Hispanics over 25 have graduated from high school while 27% have a ninth grade or lower education (Ramirez and de la Cruz, 2002). If McCroskey and Richmond's (1985) findings are applicable then America's preference for English language education could create a nation of seemingly high apprehensive Hispanic students. Is it appropriate to speak in terms of apprehension when language proficiency is an issue? By *US-American* do we also infer standards of English language proficiency that not all can meet? In addition to studying CA as a characteristic of this subject group it could be fruitful to examine how the linguistic and cultural context could be a barrier to communication.

For African-American students speaking marginalized dialects in standard dialect contexts can bring increased criticism and actually silence them. Delpit (1995) notes that teachers' correction of black students' oral reading and communication is overly focused on perceived problems with dialect use. Teacher correction of dialect over time silences students because it creates what Krashen (1982) calls an affective filter in the student's mind. The student has to think and self-correct before communicating. The time needed for self-correction could create the impression of apprehension or ignorance when the student may actually be using dialect translation to be successful in a white world.

Delpit (1995) argues that while white teachers may perceive black dialect speakers as less competent the reverse is actually true. Delpit (1995) cites her observations of a black child reading a standard-English dialect text written in a black dialect only to be repeatedly corrected by his white teacher. Delpit (1995) highlights the child's competence because he can effectively translate the text into his own dialect and cultural speech patterns. She reasons that in order to do this he must first have a strong comprehension of the standard-English text he is reading. If the teacher perceives that her black students who speak a non-standard dialect are apprehensive it may instead be an affective filter developed by the students to cope with constant dialect correction. Yet the teacher in question does not have to understand dialect fluency because in the USA white dialects

of speech are privileged thus giving her the authority to assert her own language standards. It is unlikely that the teacher will recognize that her actions may create what appears to be apprehension for her students. The US Department of Education (2003) cites that only around fifteen percent of public school teachers are non-white (i.e., African-American, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American) even though over thirty percent of students are non-white. Unless all teachers are educated, minority dialect use will continue to be problematized in schools to the detriment of minority students.

When we only think in terms the language standards provided by white, US-American dialect speakers we also miss the communication difference that Scollon and Scollon (1981) express in terms of literacy and orality. The distinction between the two is that persons who rely on literacy communicate their meanings through reliance on the spoken word and text while cultures who privilege orality communicate by way of the relationship between speaking partners and the context. The west's overemphasis of the literacy side of this equation has supported the myth of the silent, mute, or non-communicative Native American in the white imagination (Scollon and Scollon, 1982). In actuality the Athabascan populations that the Scollons studied have different expectations of communication and language. The Athabascan culture frowns upon talking too much, boasting, and allows for longer pauses and silences between speech turns. The effect is that the Athabascan is more attuned to context and often the impression of the white North American they have is a negative one that perceived an overly boastful individual who talks in a way that excludes others from conversations. Delpit (1995) similarly found that native Aleut students, when required to execute tasks that required them to talk about themselves or their accomplishments, were silenced or rendered succinct by an Aleut admonishment against appearing boastful.

While teaching public speaking at a midwestern university I encountered a similar cultural misunderstanding. The first class assignment was an introductory speech requiring students to share their greatest accomplishment(s). The speech outlines provided to me by two Japanese exchange students differed from those of the rest of the class. At the time I felt that the outlines failed to meet the requirements of the assignment because, although well prepared, the students spoke about themselves indirectly. The outlines were about family, community, and only tangentially about themselves. I urged the students to be more direct while they were trying to express to me their discomfort at speaking so confidently and so personally to a group of new people. In subsequent discussion with instructors from the same cultural group I was informed that an emphasis on family and community might not have been evasive but perhaps reflected their collective culture. The concerns my students raised about speaking personally also perhaps reflected their cultural belief that personal information should be expressed over time as a relationship is established. Also, individual public speaking is uncommon in Japanese education (Kondo, 1994; Pribyl, Keaten, Sakamoto, and Koshikawa, 1998). Had the students spoken from the outlines they had prepared I might have identified them as poor speakers, possibly apprehensive, and thus needing more of my attention as an instructor. Unfortunately they withdrew from the class before the speech was due.

As a white male my culture values proactive, direct and verbally active communication. I would not have been as successful in my native-Canadian and adopted US contexts had I not learned to communicate individualistically, assertively, and confidently in spite of my retiring disposition. As speech teachers we sometimes forget that not all students are born into nor will they seek success in cultures defined by white, western standards of communication. Kim (2002) notes that Asian cultures, to varying degrees, reward members for respecting the face of the other, the relationship, the power differential, and the group membership over acting individually. Yet Asians' communication behaviors are misinterpreted in the western imagination as submissive, silent, and/or passive thus making them seem less competent. Kim (2002) notes that in Asian cultures that privilege the group having high CA and speaking less could be interpreted as

Saying this to students creates an illusion that all dialects are equal. The reality is that white dialects are privileged over non-white dialects that are frequently marginalized.

Equating hesitancy to CA overlooks the social experience of these students as persons of color in a society dominated by Whites. Further, evaluating these students as apprehensive underestimates the previously noted ability of dialect speakers to foresee that their talk will be subject to greater scrutiny and to allow for this with an affective filter (Delpit 1995; Krashen, 1982). What one sees as apprehension could also be seen as dialect fluency or strategic communication. Subsequently, I offer suggestions for privileging the experience of the individual in future CA research.

### New Directions

I advocate an increased focus on the individual experience at the center of the original definition of CA. This requires paying greater attention to the social and cultural elements of lived experience and being aware of the dominant cultural assumptions implicit within research practice that can disadvantage culturally marginal individuals. It is a dual approach that encompasses looking outward to recognize subjects, cultures, and students are people first and also being self-reflective to realize that our cultural assumptions are reflected in our research. For the CA researcher this dual focus would encompass a sincere desire to improve the people's communication experiences while also recognizing that our perceptions of certain communication behaviors as *apprehensive* can be culturally constructed.

I see the capacity for this dual perspective in the framework provided by Valenzuela's (1999) concept of *educación*. The term resembles *education* but it exceeds simple pedagogy to denote how one should be in the world. The concept focuses on the moral, social and personal development of the individual by way of the family, school, and the society. Valenzuela (1999, p. 23) notes that *educación* is both an end and a means because to be "bien educada/o" requires engaging respectful relations and conversely one who is "mal educada/o" is poorly oriented to others. *Educación* provides a framework for learning in the speech classroom. I often hear educators lament that their students en masse do not care, whether it is about an assignment, a class, or education in general. Valenzuela (1999) calls this a misperception. What appears to be student apathy is students asking to be cared about before they care about learning. When teachers ask students to care about schooling without first demonstrating care undermines students' investment in the learning process. *Educación* can be as simple as a reciprocally caring and respectful student-teacher relationship that can provide a foundation for education.

The speech classroom frequently requires students to care without reciprocating. I think of my example of the self-introductory speech and how I wanted my students to invest in the class by sharing their personal triumphs. In return I failed to see how the assignment was incommensurate with some students' communication styles. *Educación* would require that I take the time to establish a relationship with my students that would allow me to listen and to understand that culture can create a context in which indirectness and modesty are indicators of a culturally effective communicator. Indeed, if I were true to the spirit of *educación* I would have sought a genuine relationship with the students to develop naturally instead of relying on a self-introductory speech assignment to create a forced sense of community and sharing within the classroom. I now listen to what my students are trying to tell me to achieve a respectful and inclusive classroom.

Sometimes speech education erroneously locates communication barriers only within the students and not as coming from without. Objectifying students' participation in this way would seem to facilitate making attributions, like high apprehension, without understanding what causes us to see CA instead of the experience of seeing an individual student with his/her own socio-cultural expectations. The same critique could be true of the researcher. The desire to better the experience of communication for the apprehensive individual has meant that he/she becomes

understanding of the CA phenomenon. However, that investment should not create a myopic view of CA or preclude the lived experience of the individual. The mutual regard implied by the term education can provide a basis for fostering a more open academic community that provides a space for researchers representing diverse research traditions to engage and collaborate with one another on the topic of CA. I also want to stress the value of opening both cultural and disciplinary boundaries to revitalize how we study communication. Overlooking triangulated research misses the potential for multifaceted and thus better research. This multifaceted-ness is realized when I see speech educators use of quantitative CA research with the awareness that students are not just academic but also cultural and social beings. I would like to see this holistic approach to CA, as it is reflected in many speech educators' practice, represented in the literature.

Exploring critical ethnographies of education highlighted that my own understanding of the CA phenomenon was partial. I understood CA from the front of the classroom as a professor looking out upon his classroom and seeing apprehension, frustration, and apathy. Delpit (1995) and Valenzuela's (1999) ethnographies of minority education shouted back at me from the back row in a voice fatigued from being labeled, corrected, and admonished for not caring and not being competent. This literature exposed my own misperceptions and biases while urging me to be more inclusive as a teacher and an academic.

I chose to offer three suggestions for classroom practice intended to privilege the experience of the individual and to hopefully circumvent the challenges that of locating CA across and within increasingly diverse populations of students. First, I chose not to treat my students equally but fairly. Treating students equally is the fallacy that Chesebro et al (1992) perpetrate when they urge teachers to tell their students that we all speak minority dialects as a way to increase the self-esteem of minority students. This is misguided and fails to prepare students to meet the challenges of a society that will privilege them differently, and insults students' intelligence. I opt instead for fairness by acknowledging the inequity in society and using my influence and presence in the classroom to work towards balancing those forces. Treating all students equally when they are the products of an unequal society only maintains the status quo.

One way that I do this is by allowing my students to complete their term assignment for my class in a variety of modes. I recognize that the written term paper or formal speech situation can be a form that privileges the student who uses a standard dialect and grammar of English and who has acquired the required skills of western logic and reasoning. I also recognize that at the community college where I currently teach that many of my students are learning literacy skills through remedial English courses while they are simultaneously taking my course. For written assignments I also allow oral, artistic, visual, and multimedia formats to allow students to demonstrate their strengths. This also recognizes that speech students come from a variety of disciplines.

The example of the term assignment prefaces my second practice which is encouraging students to be fluid in their negotiations of communication. Delpit (1995) urges teaching students to be comfortable in both their heritage language/dialect traditions but also fostering the language skills that will allow them to succeed in larger society. In my speech class I provided the opportunities for one student, an aspiring singer, to be able to present an informational speech in standard dialect about the vocal apparatus. For an occasional speech assignment she delivered a lifetime achievement award at the Grammys to her favorite R&B artist using language and dialect that reflected her affiliation with, respect for, and values of her chosen cultural and artistic communities. The speech was a success and by giving her this opportunity she was able to both succeed while staying true to the nature of the occasional speech which is, first and foremost,



understanding of the CA phenomenon. However, that investment should not create a myopic view of CA or preclude the lived experience of the individual. The mutual regard implied by the term education can provide a basis for fostering a more open academic community that provides a space for researchers representing diverse research traditions to engage and collaborate with one another on the topic of CA. I also want to stress the value of opening both cultural and disciplinary boundaries to revitalize how we study communication. Overlooking triangulated research misses the potential for multifaceted and thus better research. This multifaceted-ness is realized when I see speech educators use of quantitative CA research with the awareness that students are not just academic but also cultural and social beings. I would like to see this holistic approach to CA, as it is reflected in many speech educators' practice, represented in the literature.

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premised on an expression of shared values. My job as professor was to recognize how her apprehension might vary and differently manifest from one assignment to another and to provide appropriate support and feedback.

The grading process can contribute to apprehension. Like Hinchcliff-Pelias (1992) I provide ungraded opportunities for student communication. Teachers also need to refocus students' ideas about public speaking success. Recently I had a student self-identify as highly apprehensive, disclosing that at her Yeshiva high school students were seen and not heard. We negotiated the speech requirements and she was able to speak by bringing a friend to stand with her and demonstrate her visual aids. She could still not fulfill all of the requirements of the speech assignment and she expressed her frustration at not doing an A speech. I was honest in assessing the shortcomings of her performance but I also refocused her attention on the rewards that come from her overcoming a previously insurmountable communication hurdle. She conquered her apprehension, though not as well as she had hoped, and this was reason enough for personal satisfaction. As teachers and students of communication we all share in the blame for losing sight of communication for communication's sake; the joy of the spoken word.

I term this section "New Directions" rather than "Conclusions" because I believe that this critique represents a beginning and not an end. I do not have all of the answers to the questions raised by this essay. These questions reflect my belief that CA can and should expand to better account for the diverse social, cultural, and qualitative realities of the individual student. I recognize that reexamining CA through critical lenses borrowed from other disciplines, methodologies, and perspectives is only one direction that this critique can take. Other directions should seek to revitalize perspectives on classroom communication for both teachers and learners so as to avoid the potential for student disempowerment that can result from undue or uninformed attributions of CA.

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